

Highland Amateur Cup Round 2:

## **Avoch A.F.C. 1 (0) Carloway F.C. 0 (0)**

*Niall Docherty 86*

*At Coronation Park, Avoch, Rossshire.*

*Saturday, 3rd June 2017. 1.00 p.m.*

*Referee: John Nicolson*

*First line judge:*

*Second line judge:*

**CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.**

*Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.*

*Asst. Managers: Domhnall Mackay; Iain Angus "Gus" Maciver.*

*David Beaton*

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Donald "D.I." MacIennan Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe Armstrong*

*Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Callum "Beag" Mackay Billy Anderson*

*Archie "Statto" MacDonald*

*Andrew "Tago" Maciver*

*Subs. used: Dan Crossley (Billy Anderson) 61; Kenny "Beag" MacIennan (Callum "Beag" Mackay) 61; Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (Joe Armstrong) 87.*

*Subs. not used: Jordan Macleod; Sven Wiltshire.*

*Yellow cards: Donald "D.I." MacIennan (dangerous play) 20; Domhnall Mackay (dangerous play/retaliation) 80.*

**AVOCH A.F.C.: 3-5-2**

*MANAGER: George Patience.*

*Rhys Shewan Craig Stuart*

*Kyle Maclean Roddy Macphee Colin Mason Craig Munro Niall Docherty*

*Martin Macallister (capt.) Keith Mason Scott Davidson*

*Martin Smith*

*Subs. used: Paul Gair (Roddy Macphee) 58; Phil Macdonald (Craig Stuart) 66; Ross Munro (Rhys Shewan) 66; Michael Rodgers (Colin Mason) 76.*

*Sub. Not used: Iain Wilson*

*Yellow cards: ? (dangerous play) 69; Scott Davidson (ungentlemanly conduct) 74; Paul Gair (time-wasting) 90.*

The heady excitement of being on the HAC road again, Carloway's first mainland adventure since the year they reached the Final in 2014, was tempered somewhat by where that road led to - Avoch, of all places, whose club side must rank alongside Pentland United and Wick Groats as the teams most others would prefer to avoid, early in the competition anyway. One thing is certain however: you cannot win this cup without beating one of them, at least.

This was only na Gormaich's fifth appearance in the open rounds of the HAC, the break-through year being 2008 when the Blues crushed Halkirk 5-1 at Culbokie, before losing 3-4 after extra-time to Castletown in Fortrose. Two years later they lost at Culbokie again, 3-5 to Golspie Stafford, but the following year, 2011, a sparkling campaign took them past Lochs (2-1), Athletic (4-3), Castletown (4-0), and Kirkwall Rovers (5-1), to an initial Semi-Final, but the reigning cup-holders, Avoch, deservedly prevailed 3-1. A year later, Fate threw the two sides together again, at

Culbokie in Round 3, but an 89th minute header once more denied the Blues.

lochdar Saints spoiled the party in the opening round the following year, but 2014 witnessed the Blues' finest campaign in the cup, despite an unpromising start which saw them claw themselves back from imminent defeat to overcome Barra 4-2. Next they overpowered Athletic 2-0 at Goathill, then enjoyed an unexpected walk-over over Culbokie, before achieving hard-fought victories over the holders, Wick Groats, 3-2 at Ullapool, and Saints, 2-0 at Goathill. Unfortunately, the fairytale ended there, and two Round 1 exits followed in 2015 and 2016, 1-4 to Point and 0-1 to Back.

Remarkably, nine of the squad on duty that August day in Inverness appeared today: David Beaton, "D.I.", Domhnall Mackay (Man of the Match that day); "Tiger", "Dokus"; Dan Crossley; "Statto"; Billy Anderson; and Gordon "Tago" Macdonald; and four of the present Avoch squad - the captain, Martin Macallister, Kyle Maclean, Paul Gair, and Ross Munro - also featured.

There were a few changes from the side that struggled against Athletic last Monday. David Beaton replaced Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie between the posts and Kevin "Gochan" Macleod was unavailable. A major blow was that young midfield *animateur*, Eachainn Miller, contracted to Stirling University, was ineligible, and this placed a heavy responsibility on his side-kick, Billy Anderson, to produce the defence-breakers to set up Andrew "Tago" Maciver up front. "Statto" returned, though, on the left midfield, so "Dokus" crossed to the right, and young star, Callum "Beag" Mackay, re-appeared in central midfield. Exciting news was the return of game-changer, Dan Crossley, to the bench. which also featured Kenny "Beag" Maclennan.

To win today, Carloway would have to equal, or surpass, their two finest HAC performances: the 5-1 QF victory in 2011 over Kirkwall Rovers in Maryburgh and the 3-2 QF triumph over the then Cup holders, Wick Groats, in Ullapool in 2014. So, all to play for in the Blues' first visit to this picturesque Black Isle village and its neat little ground, the views from the south side embankment eastwards blessing the Carloway faithful with stunning panoramic views of the Moray Firth towards Chanonry Point and Fort George. Not that the Carloway defence had much time to admire the view. Surprisingly, there was no one taking entry money either, the only money changing hands being given to a lovely lady selling raffle tickets.

The opening exchanges left the diehards in no doubt of what was to unfold, as early conflict would have easily graced the fields of Bannockburn or Agincourt. No room for passengers today. Immediate aggression saw na Gormaich win a free-kick in the centre circle, and Anderson's beautifully-flighted strike led to a skirmish around the Avoch penalty box before breaking out towards the Carloway right corner of the box. "Dokus" controlled it, then turned neatly to his left, before clipping in a low left-foot curler toward goal, but Smith had no problem grabbing the underhit ball, waist-high to his right.

In 4 minutes Docherty tested Armstrong for pace on the right, checked, then found Macphee towards him on the near corner of the box, but his curler in its turn was saved similarly by Beaton. Two minutes later the Black Isle boys almost improved on this with a similar move down the right which saw Mason pick out Macphee racing

though the Carloway line, between “Laxay” and Armstrong. In line with the box he lifted over a crisp head-high cross which Stuart moved in front of “D.I.” to meet, 12 metres out in the centre, but his glancing header was read by Beaton and the keeper did well to finger-tip it away for a corner to his right.

The opening minutes demonstrated clearly the game-plan: as in most keenly-contested fixtures, the battle-ground was midfield. Avoch were forceful and inventive, shape-shifting to press, pressuring young Joe Armstrong on the right, while Stuart and Shewan, in true Carecas-style, changed places, charged, withdrew, trying to out-think “D.I.” and “Laxay”. Carloway maintained a disciplined shape, retreated, blocked, then tried to deliver the killer ball to free “Tago”.

The nature of the play closed down movement, stifled creativity, and minimized opportunities. It was 16 minutes before the men in black threatened again, a corner swinging in high from their right to be reverse-headed by the far post, 6 metres out, by Mason but the ball looped harmlessly over the bar. A minute later Macphee, 20 metres from the bye-line, out on Avoch’s right touch-line, cut in square away from Armstrong, past Mackay, and unleashed a venomous left-foot daisy-cutter from the corner of the box. It was too hot for Beaton to hold and Stuart reacted instantly to thwack in the rebound from 12 metres out in the centre, but “Statto” was equally fast to throw himself in front of the ball, and the ball rocketed away for a corner to the Blues’ left off his outstretched right leg. Phew! This was to be the only real chance of the half.

Thirty-two minutes had elapsed before na Gormaich again troubled Smith as Callum “Beag”, in the centre circle, managed to feed “Dokus”, breaking inwards off Macallister to drive a left-footer, low from the edge of the box, but it flew at least a couple of metres wide of Avoch’s right-hand post. In 38 minutes a home free-kick, 20 metres out on the right edge of the box, cleared the line and centre and found Shewan unmarked by the far post, 10 metres from goal. The goal lay open to him but he had taken a step forward too soon and was flagged.

**Half-time: Avoch 0 Carloway 0**

It was difficult to figure out what would have been best for “Windy” or George Patience to advise their boys over their half-time Bovril and oranges. A change in tactics seemed unnecessary at this point. Neither side was struggling or any player found wanting. In fact, the stalemate was a result of no one under-performing. Avoch had the edge no doubt, but “Laxay’s” excellently marshalled defence was blocking any inventive game-play by Maclean, Mason *et al.* Avoch would simply wish to maintain this cohesion, perhaps at a heightened rate, and believe in themselves that the vital opening must surely come. Carloway were coping, but, worryingly, they had been unable to penetrate the final third of the pitch, to allow “Tago” or “Dokus” to awake Smith from his deep slumber.

The first incident of the second half arrived in 55 minutes when David Beaton, receiving a high back-pass from “D.I.”, rushed out to the right corner of his box. Under pressure from Shewan, he nodded it onwards and sideways to his left away from the striker, the ball bounced high on the firm pitch and he was then forced to pick the ball up to prevent a potentially disastrous outcome. Cue everyone in the

Blues' box except the woman selling the raffle-tickets. From little more than 6 metres towards the left of goal, Macphee drove a ferocious low drive into a forest of bodies, the ball rebounding straight outwards to be met on 20 metres by Mason, but his reflex shot whizzed well over the bar centrally.

The men in black were now exhibiting an increased urgency to put clear light between themselves and the visitors and were first to shake things up, with Paul Gair (whom the Carloway boys knew well!) replaced Macphee. Immediately Avoch broke on their left and Shewan made the bye-line, 12 metres from goal. As "Tiger" challenged, he checked, turned back a metre, then whipped across a nasty rising right-footer which the approaching Beaton managed to parry upwards and onwards. It seemed to run along the face of the bar and away to the keeper's left. Moments later, he had to look sharp again when a fiery Mason shot from 20 metres out in the centre compelled him to beat the ball away to his left for a corner.

Midway through the half, the management drew up their final battle-lines: Kenny "Beag" entered on the right to inject power and pace, with "Dokus" switching left; and Dan Crossley added pace also and creativity in the centre in an attempt to link with the isolated figure of "Tago", who more and more resembled Napoleon on Elba. The Black Isle men sharpened their knives up front with Phil Macdonald and Ross Munro replacing front-runners, Craig Stuart and Ally Shewan, in a quest for that single goal which more and more looked like all that would be necessary to claim victory.

In 73 minutes an Avoch free-kick, on their left and 20 metres from the bye-line, was cleared out by a "Laxay" header 12 metres from goal but the resultant Docherty drive from 20 metres crept a foot outside Beaton's right-hand post. Five minutes later a Crossley feed in the centre circle allowed Kenny "Beag" to move down on the right but his forward low diagonal was blocked for a corner. The in-swinger was nodded out by Mason in the centre and "Statto", just outside the centre edge of the box, unaware he had a moment to steady, instantly whacked back a low right-footer but his rushed attempt sliced badly away to the right.

The final ten minutes witnessed frantic activity and pressure from the home side. In 80 minutes another Avoch break down the left saw Gair find Maclean moving behind "Tiger" on the overlap, but his drive from the left corner of the box was safely held by Beaton. Three minutes later the men in black came down the right, with Rodgers, on the centre line, releasing the ball forward for Munro to test Armstrong. He made the bye-line, then turned neatly in in the right corner, was challenged by the full-back, then the arriving Mackay, but the ball broke kindly for him behind them, and he moved in to crack the ball goal-wards. However, Beaton beat it away for a corner at the near post. A minute later yet another Avoch free-kick, on the Carloway left and midway within their half, was headed clear by "Dokus" of all people as the front-line was pushed closer and closer towards Beaton.

As extra-time beckoned, the wall was finally breached. Again Avoch drove down the left with Munro feeding Docherty as he charged towards the Carloway goal, on the left. He seemed to lose control but as he was confronted by "Tiger" and "D.I.", he unleashed a left-foot cracker from 10 metres which travelled behind and over Beaton and into the roof of the net (1-0).

**Full-time: Avoch 1 (0) Carloway 0 (0)**

It was a tense, exciting game, in which the Carloway faithful saw much to admire in their team's performance, despite the late goal leaving them in a state of abject misery. As has been the case so often this season, displays from goal-line to centre-line have improved out of all recognition since the first month of the season. However, midfield into attack remains, and today continued to be, the problem. Martin Smith did not have a direct shot to save throughout, but simply had to remain alert and steady on cross-balls, etc.

Avoch were just that little bit sounder in midfield and inventive coming forward, repeatedly testing na Gormaich's back-line for any possible lapse or slip-up, more so as the tie progressed. David Beaton certainly had plenty to do, especially in the second half, and a feeling of inevitability soon emerged that the home side would get that crucial goal, the longer the game went on.

So, a season without silver-ware now beckons for the Blues despite several recent outstanding performances. Carloway are starting to run out of cups, and they only have an outside chance of League honours. However, on the plus side is awareness that judging from today's performance, Carloway should have little difficulty competing with any island side. Scoring against them is another matter.

**Avoch Man of the Match: Kyle Maclean**

**Carloway Man of the Match: Ali "Laxay" Macdonald.**